Sociological Teaching

Curious Citizens: Curriculum, Care and Social Good in Online Enabling Pathways Education

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Abstract

Situated in the context of Widening Participation policy and practice and its resonances with the traditional 'purpose' of Higher Education as a civic duty and public good (Giroux, 2002), this article draws on a Collaborative Inquiry Project (CIP) in one Australian online/blended enabling pathways program. Enabling programs in Australia are designed to provide an alternative pathway to higher education studies for students who do not possess traditional entry requirements and are similar to Access education in the UK or community college education in North America. This article interrogates the curriculum of the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) enabling pathways program at the University of Newcastle in terms of its relationship to "what matters" for enabling educators. As part of the CIP project, an audit of key curriculum indicators (Assessment, Engagement, Academic Literacies and Pedagogies) was conducted along with a semi-structured group discussion amongst the enabling educator participants. This discussion revealed a deep engagement with curriculum design and with the philosophies underpinning Enabling Pathways education and Widening Participation (see Motta & Bennett, 2018; Bennett et al., 2016). Further, these philosophies were explicitly articulated by participant-group members in ways which revealed a commitment to citizenry and the founding features of Higher Education. Enabling Pathways education, despite its diversity across Australia (Pitman, 2017; Baker & Irwin, 2016), is a robust field with strong connections to undergraduate programs, but with a unique set of considerations in terms of curriculum

design—especially in designing for diverse cohorts studying in online/blended modes. In this article we explore stories of success in online curriculum design as well as provide a view of an interdisciplinary whole-of-program approach to serving and supporting online Enabling Pathways students in becoming 'curious citizens.'

Keywords: Collaborative Inquiry, curriculum, neoliberalism, online pedagogy, widening participation

Introduction

The Open Foundation (Online/Blended) program is an enabling pathways program at the University of Newcastle. In Australia, enabling programs refer to programs of study (usually situated within universities) which offer courses designed to prepare future students for entry to higher education. As an equity and access mechanism, they provide an alternative pathway to university for students who do not possess traditional entry qualifications. The University of Newcastle's enabling program is fee-free and open access, meaning that students who wish to enter the program do not need to prove any prior educational experience, capability, or attainment. Given that enabling pathways programs and, therefore, the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) Program, provide alternatives to the 'traditional' school–university entry to higher education, they can furthermore be seen as an expression of Australia's Widening Participation (WP) or equity agenda (Cocks & Stokes, 2013) which has been articulated through various government policies and legislation since the 1970s (Irwin & Hamilton, 2020). The aim of these policies is to provide both increased participation in, and widened access to, higher education in Australia as an expression of social justice where representation in higher education reflects the demographics of the community (Gale & Tranter, 2011).

While many enabling pathways programs do not limit entry based on 'equity' group identification, they attract students from groups who are underrepresented in higher education, especially students from low socioeconomic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and rural and remote backgrounds (Pitman et al., 2016). Despite its

diversity across Australia (Pitman et al., 2016; Baker & Irwin, 2016), enabling pathways education is a robust field with strong connections to undergraduate programs, yet with a unique set of considerations in terms of curriculum design for diverse and underrepresented cohorts.

Situated, then, in the context of WP policy and practice and its resonances with the traditional 'purpose' of higher education as a civic duty and public good (Giroux, 2002), this article draws on a Collaborative Inquiry Project (CIP) conducted with educators in the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) Program. As part of the CIP project, an audit of key curriculum domains (Assessment, Engagement, Academic Literacies and Online Teaching and Learning Methods) was conducted along with a focused discussion amongst the project team. The team consisted of eight educators in the program with a range of disciplinary expertise. Our discussion revealed a deep engagement with curriculum design and with the philosophies underpinning enabling pathways education and WP (see Bennett et al., 2016; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Further, these philosophies were explicitly articulated by team members in ways which revealed a commitment to citizenry and the foundational philosophies of higher education. In this article, we provide an insider view of an interdisciplinary curriculum approach to serving and supporting online/blended enabling pathways students in becoming 'curious citizens' despite an uncomfortable context which challenges, yet does not defeat, our capacities for care.

Widening Participation and Neoliberalism: Strange Bedfellows

The bedrock of WP policies is the desire to enact social justice for communities by broadening access to higher education so that participation is representative of populations (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Pitman, 2017). In doing this, WP programs and policies aim to facilitate access to, and participation in, higher education for those whose histories and positionings mean that they would ordinarily be excluded from higher education (Burke, 2013). This social justice desire aligns with what many researchers and commentators on higher education have posited as the long-held traditional purpose of universities: to perform a social and public good for their communities "through research, teaching and service" (Wheaton, 2020, p. 76) and to

perform the "social imperative of educating citizens who can sustain and develop inclusive democratic public spheres" (Giroux, 2002, p. 432).

However, the traditional purpose of universities has come under intense and increasing pressure from neoliberal logics in the decades since the 1980s. Neoliberalism and its manifestations in higher education are known through various guises and labels: economic rationalism, corporatisation, new managerialism, corporate culture, and others. In short, it is a form of governance characterised by a focus on individual autonomy, economic privatisation and minimal State intervention (Ball, 2003; Davies et al., 2006; Fredman & Doughney, 2012). Neoliberalism's impacts on higher education include increased competition between institutions for funding (Marginson, 2006), a focus on individual achievements and responsibility for staff and students (Macfarlane, 2017; Southgate & Bennett, 2014), and a curriculum which is becoming employment oriented and focused on human capital, while moving away from "developing an informed national citizenry" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 12). Further, the impacts of the measurement of individual achievement on academic staff means that little value is placed on the "social, emotional and moral" aspects of their work, such as care and respect, because these are difficult to measure (Ball, 2012, quoted in Sutton, 2017).

These impacts have displaced a university governance which focuses on the purpose of providing public good (Ball, 2003; Giroux, 2002) and replaced it with universities that now must operate as part of the competitive higher education system (Marginson, 2006).

In the Australian context, WP policies have always been entangled with these neoliberal logics (Gale & Parker, 2013). In recent decades, and in response to an influential, government-initiated review of Australian higher education (Bradley et al., 2008), WP or equity in higher education has come to focus primarily on facilitating the participation of low socioeconomic status people in higher education (Gale & Parker, 2013). However, WP or equity policies are articulated as both social justice interventions and ways to improve Australia's economic future (Gale & Tranter, 2012). According to Gale and Tranter's (2011) review of Australia's higher education policies, social justice goals alone have "never been enough to justify" the expansion of universities to include underrepresented groups (Gale & Tranter, 2011, p. 41).

Indeed, they argue that economic imperatives have been used as the strongest arguments to widen participation in Australian higher education. Intertwined with these WP policies and associated interventions have been the entrepreneurial imperatives of neoliberalism in Australian universities.

While arguing that various higher education reforms and interventions have "prioritised efforts to reduce educational disadvantage", Peacock et al. (2014), acknowledge that these reforms are situated within the context of "neoliberal education and economic policy" (p. 378). Neoliberal logics take further hold of WP interventions as they are often operationalised to support employment-oriented individual goals (Peacock et al., 2014) and used as an instrument to increase the competitive advantage of universities (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2013).

Navigating 'Uncomfortable' Spaces

The position of online enabling pathways education in the political and structural context of Australian higher education mirrors the tensions within WP discourses. As Irwin and Hamilton (2020) have previously argued, online enabling pathways education is 'uncomfortably'

positioned simultaneously as an expression of WP policies (Stone, 2016) and as an instrument of neoliberal logics, through which universities can increase their geographical footprint and thereby student numbers, in an—arguably—cost effective way (Irwin & Hamilton, 2020). Indeed, online learning in higher education has long been derided as just a "technological quick fix(es)" (Giroux, 2002, p. 442) used by universities that are beholden to neoliberal, economic rationalist strategies to increase their geographical reach and attract more students in the competitive higher education 'market' (Chau, 2010).

For online enabling pathways educators operating in this environment, the pressures and tensions are numerous: guided by philosophies of teaching which are deeply embedded with care, we are committed to designing curriculums in ways which serve our students and communities. However, we must do this under neoliberal constraints which have the potential to influence how, what and why we teach.

Enabling Pathways Curriculum:Critical and Caring

Enabling pathways programs across Australia are currently free to develop theirown diverse curriculums in order to respond to their local communities,however, they all share a common purpose:"to ensure students are academically prepared to begin study at undergraduate level" (Syme et al., 2020, p. 3). As an enabling pathways program, the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) currently offers 24 discipline-focused courses acrosstwo semesters and provides free and open access to higher education for increasingly large numbers of students from the University's local and regional areas as well as from further afield around Australia. While approaches to the curriculum of the Open Foundation Program, andcorrespondingly, its online/blended mode, have evolved since its inception in 1974, the foundational concept of "adoptingmodern multidisciplinary approaches ... designed to appeal to enquiring mature minds" (Smith, 1974, quoted in May &Bunn, 2015) has remained.

The teaching philosophy guiding the Open Foundation enabling pathways program relies on Enabling Pedagogies (Bennett et al,, 2016). Enabling Pedagogies "provide dialogical spaces where students' existing knowledges are valued ..."; eschew deficit framings; and develop in students the capacities to be able to both use and challenge "the academic and intellectual resources" required for university (Bennett et al. 2016, p. 9).

Further, in its contemporary incarnation, the multidisciplinarity of the program isunderpinned by a 'multiliteracies' approach(Miller, 2015) whereby each course, while focused on specific discipline content knowledge, aims to embed explicit teachingof the tacit and implicit academic, information and digital literacies essential for students to successfully engage with the university teaching and learning environment (O'Rourke et al., 2019). As opposed to viewing students as in deficit, teaching staff value students' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2013) taking an 'abundance' approach (Miller, 2015) to acknowledge students' wide range of linguistic, literacies and life knowledges toinform their learning design and teaching practices. Through this approach, our educators are concerned with developing students' criticality in order to enhance their capacities and capabilities to operate as "active agents" (Hattam & Stokes, 2020)in their own learning.

Importantly, yet less visible, is the curriculum's attention to 'pedagogies of care' (Motta & Bennett, 2018) which form part of what have been termed Enabling Pedagogies (Bennett et al., 2016). Pedagogies of care "emphasis[e] optimism and empathy" (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 9). These caring pedagogies and epistemologies were found to be enacted in the Open Foundation Program and its online modality by Motta and Bennett (2018). Pedagogies of care manifest themselves through our educators' "ethics, practices and relationships" (p. 632) and have the potential to disrupt and re-balance neoliberal interpretations of access and WP initiatives (Motta & Bennett, 2020).

Collaborative Inquiry

A shared focus on praxis is fostered in the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) program through a variety of both formal and informal professional development activities for educators. Aligning with this philosophy, a Collaborative Inquiry Project was initiated by two members of the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) program in order to identify and explore any common concerns relating to our teaching practice. Ongoing, contract and sessional staff were invited to participate (n=13) with eight staffmembers contributing to the project. Ofthese eight staff members, two were full-time ongoing, one was full-time on contract, and five were sessional academics. The disciplines represented in this project are Chemistry and Life Sciences, Education, Australian History, Law, Linguistics, and Sociology.

A collaborative inquiry is an inclusive research methodology that is "participatory, democratic and reflective in design, method and dissemination" (Bridges and McGee, 2011, p. 213). The members of this collaborative inquiry were also participantsin the research. Members were asked tocontribute to all stages of the project with anumber of meetings being held to discuss the aims, research questions and outcomes of the project. While we acknowledge that this methodology challenges the traditionalacademic approach to research, it is modelled here for two specific reasons. Firstly, this methodology acknowledges theexpertise of the group in delivering online Open Foundation courses.

Secondly, with the representation of members from different disciplines, this methodology allowed for a research process that was not tied to a specific discipline, rather it allowed member-participants to bring their research expertise to the inquiry. Essentially, it "demystif[ied] the research and … empower[ed] people to research their lived experience within the context of wider sociopolitical environments" (Bridges and McGee, 2011,p. 258). While two members of the group initiated and led the inquiry, the traditional hierarchies of academic research were broken down meaning the inquiry was a joint enterprise ensuring the co-construction of knowledge.

Following the initial CIP meeting, one of the members elected to conduct an audit of pedagogical practices in our current courses to identify differences and commonalities across the Program. The audit included all 10 Semester 2, 2020 courses (an additional 2 courses were added to the suite in 2021) in the following discipline areas: Business,Sociology, Education, Law, Linguistics, History, Science for Nursing andMidwifery, Life Sciences, Mathematics (two courses: Introductory and Advanced).The curriculum in these courses was organised around the following key domain areas: Assessment; Academic Literacies; Engagement; and Online Teaching and Learning Methods.

Concurrently, we collaborated online to develop the following research questions which were explored through a recorded semi-structured group discussion.

1. *How can we better understandthe ways in which different courses operate and is there a 'best' approach?*
2. *What discipline specific knowledges and / or philosophical approaches to teaching inform the way we approach our online pedagogies and course designs?*
3. *How do we manage our students' cognitive load?*

4. *The transcript from our semi-structured group discussion was analysed thematically by two of the team members and member- checked by the remaining members. The following key themes were identified:'disciplinary differences'; 'purpose of enabling education'; and 'the effects of time on online pedagogical practices.' These themes will be explored in the remainder of the article.Taking Different Roads to theSame Destination*

Explicit Differences

The audit of courses in the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) program revealed both commonalities and differences in the way online teaching and learning is approached. While program and course design are guided by consistent navigation principles and visual design, differences do exist between courses in terms of how learning is accessed and experienced. To some extent, these differences reveal historical influences on course design. Of special interest, however, are differences in online pedagogical practices which were found across the four key domains of the audit: Assessment, Engagement, Academic Literacies and Online Teaching and Learning Methods. For example, in the Academic Literacies domain, 'research' and 'referencing' were explicitly taught in seven out of ten courses, reflecting the importance of these practices across disciplines in terms of preparing students for undergraduate studies. Other practices, however, such as 'oral presentations' and 'group/team-work' featured in just four out of ten courses. Those courses were Business, Sociology, Education and Science for Nursing and Midwifery where oral- and team-work are both key academic and professional practices.

In speaking about their approach to teaching oral presentations in Sociology, one participant revealed how alignment with future undergraduate studies underpinned the approach:

> I always felt like we were teaching too much to the assessment tasks, rather than the underlying skill that the student needed, and would need, going into undergraduate. So that's why, when we changed it this year, we focused on those kinds of sociological skills that are aimed at assessment tasks, but also try and show students that these skills are something that's beyond this course. … So, really trying to move beyond just assessment tasks to the skills of it. (CIP semi-structured group discussion)

While discussing our different approaches to teaching and learning online, CIP participants recounted how students often questioned why they were being assessed in different ways, or, for example, why their learning in one course took place through multiple discussion activities, while in another course, it took place through reading course notes. One participant sought feedback from the CIP group on their own pedagogical practices,

> I mean, I don't know if you give marks to encourage students to use the discussion board or not; because I know that I have students doing Education who would really like me to encourage a bit more. You know,

push the participation on the discussion board" (CIP semi-structured group discussion).

Participants in the group critically questioned whether these teaching and learning practices should be standardised across the program in order to minimise barriers to student learning. However, as one participant in the CIP pointed out, disciplinary differences in approaches is important, not only because the subject matter aligns to particular disciplines, but also because the academic practices may differ too: *"much of what you might consider to be transferrable is actually quite specific to your discipline and thepractices embedded in it"* (CIP semi- structured group discussion). The group discussed how it was important to explicate these differences to students:

> I often talk to students about how different lecturers and different courses and different disciplines look different in the way that they are pedagogically structured. … [P]erhaps if we're takingan interdisciplinary learning approach, that that's something that we need to take on as the course coordinators or course designers, that we make that veryclear, that the way that you're going to learn and be assessed in [one] course isgoing to be different to the way you're going to learn and be assessed in [another] course (CIP semi-structured group discussion).

In alignment with the scholarly work on Academic Literacies (for example, Lea & Street, 2006; Miller, 2015), making these disciplinary differences explicit and unpacking how and why particular disciplines operate introduces students to thinking about the situated and constructednature of academic practices in terms of what is valued in particular disciplinarycontexts. In terms of our online curriculum, these disciplinary differences are enacted, not only through our embedded academic literacies content, but also through our teaching methods and practice. In short, for our online enabling curriculum design, there is no 'gold standard', rather,disciplinary differences influence and guideour methods.

Developing 'Curious' Citizens

Irrespective of our disciplinary differences,the educators in our CIP group have sharedgoals. For all of us, our students were at thecentre of our discussions around our different pedagogies and practices, for example,

> […] whenever you are coming up with a certain assessment, or task, or whatever,trying to think from a student perspective. Like, "Would I love

> to be involved in that particular task?" "What I can get from that particular task? (CIP semi-structured group discussion)

All of us endeavour to teach our "*students to be university students, but also [to be] members of the world*" (CIP semi- structured group discussion). Teaching how to 'be a student' was linked to the embedded academic literacies skills and practices in courses. As one participant mentioned, "*we use [our discipline] as the beacon to teach skills for university studies. So, we're kind of teaching students the cultural capital that is needed to do uni*" (CIP semi-structured group discussion). This view is supported by Habel et al. (2016) who, through a Bourdieusian lens, found that enabling pathways programs, while developing practical skills and practices, also provide the opportunity to help students understand how to become university students.

As Allen (2020) points out, students themselves view 'success' in their enabling programs as a fluid and multilayered concept which does not solely rely on "graded outcome[s]" (p. 17). Our educators share this view, and what was clear throughout our discussion, is that teaching and learning is more than just equipping students with the competencies and practices needed for them to succeed in measurable ways at university. Our group have hopes for their students that move beyond the limited scope of assessment frameworks and rubrics.

The final question we posed to ourselves during our semi-structured discussion was, "what do we teach, and why?". The answers, despite our diverse disciplinary backgrounds and approaches, were remarkably similar and focused on our desire to contribute to the development of our students' ways of seeing and being in the world: "*When I teach my course in History, I make an effort to talk about people belonging to different groups of people, with the hope that they are all going to embrace or feel curious about something*" (CIP semi-structured group discussion). Another CIP participant talked about how their discipline, Linguistics, had far reaching implications for the ways students view the world

> […] it's something which is there around them. So, to make them conscious of the fact that they can actually apply the knowledge and skills in everyday life, and how they can benefit from using it, and being aware of those skills" (CIP semi-structured group discussion).

Developing a critical consciousness in students was at the heart of another participant's teaching philosophy, *"I just see my content in some ways very secondary to being good global [citizens]*

… rational, logical, can work out what's accurate, can create an argument, can see holes in arguments. All of that is really important" (CIP semi-structured group discussion). These expansive hopes for our students demonstrate a defiance of institutional, employment-focused discourses, so too, they avoid narrowly focused discourses of channelling students into undergraduate studies. Rather, they express shared and heartfelt commitments to developing a critical and curious citizenry capable of contributing to and shaping social and public good.

The Pressures and Pleasures of Time

Despite online education being viewed by institutions as a cost-efficiency, the online educators in our CIP drew explicit connections between their careful and caring pedagogical practices and the large investments of (often uncompensated) time it takes to achieve them. Of particular significance, was the time and care taken with responding to, and teaching, students via discussion board conversations.

> I make an effort to respond to every single student that introduces themselves to me, and make a comment, which is a really… it's time consuming in that first week, but I find that they engage more if they know that they're going to get something back from you (CIP semi-structured group discussion).

Time was a factor at play for both asynchronous teaching such as discussion board activities, as well as for synchronous activities like online tutorials. As one CIP member pointed out, a wholly online teaching environment requires time and care in thinking about, preparing and composing communications and materials so that "students will get the right message" where the visual and verbal cues of traditional face-to-face feedback and explanation is missing.

While our CIP members were happy to spend this extra time for their students, professional tensions and struggles were evident during our semi-structured group discussion. One participant recounted their own internal dialogue around their efforts

to engage their large cohort of students with weekly wrap-up videos, ultimately decidingthat this time and care spent for a small portion of students was "important":

> With 390 students ..., I have about 70 students who look at those videos. The other night, after spending a decent amount of time recording and then editing it, I was like, "Oh, eff this. ... I'm not doing that anymore, because it's a waste of my time". But then I was like, actually, I think for the people who are using it, it's quite important. Like, if it only reaches 70 people, is that better than not doing it at all? I think it kind of brings up that interesting element of seeing people, and this idea of human interaction in the online courses *(CIP semi-structured group discussion).*

This sentiment was echoed by another CIPmember, who justified their extra, unpaid time with a focus on student care and engagement, *"I know that that is a preventative measure for them, so that's why I invest the time there. But I know I'm not getting paid for it. I know it's my own choice. So that's why I invest it there"* (CIP semi-structured group discussion).

Five out of the eight members of our groupare sessional academics. For them, the discourse of 'extra time' or 'more time' equates to time spent uncompensated in measurable financial terms. Compared to face-to-face teaching, one sessional participant said they spent *"more time priorto tutes [tutorials]"* with *"lots of planning, and lots of extra work outside"* (CIP semi- structured group discussion). Making decisions and choices about time was of concern for another CIP member: *"but we only have so much time, obviously, and we have decisions to make in the best investment in our time"* (CIP semi- structured group discussion).

It is beyond the scope of this article toexplore these discourses fully, however, it is clear, that for the educators in our group responsibility for students' care, learning and outcomes is seen as an individual responsibility (see, for example, MacFarlane, 2017), often requiring professional struggles, uncomfortable choices and sacrifice, where personal philosophies of teaching and a commitment to Enabling Pedagogies of care ultimately outweigh the pressures felt by operating in a neoliberal higher education context.

Conclusion

Working within an equity-focused, yet "unstable" WP context (Burke, 2013), we employed a Collaborative Inquiry methodology, to interrogate our own practices and values as online enabling pathways educators working in the Open Foundation (Online/Blended) Program. We found that while we inhabit an uncomfortable space located between higher education's neoliberal project and the social justice desires of equity in higher education (Irwin & Hamilton, 2020), the original social justice purposes of WP—and of universities in general—are at the heart of how we, as online enabling pathways educators, design and enact our curriculums. It is clear, then, through the articulation of Enabling Pedagogies (Bennett et al., 2016), that the ballast underpinning our program (and others like ours) aligns with the broad 'public good', social welfare traditions of universities and with the desires of WP policies. This ballast, we argue, sits outside of contemporary policy and economic decisions which follow as a consequence.

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